Wittgenstein and the phenomenal logic

1. Wittgenstein's focus on language games:

Against the idea of a static, universal logic: before his later work (primarily Philosophological Investigations), Wittgenstein largely adhered to a logical positivist view, believing in a universal, objective logic of language. He aimed to uncover the foundational rules that govern all meaningful statements.
Language games as contextualised Practices: In the Investigations, he radically shifted his approach. He argued that language isn't governed by fixed rules but instead operates within "language games" – specific activities and contexts in which words gain their meaning. Think of a game of chess, a conversation, or even baking a cake. Each has its own rules, its own uses, and its own way of creating meaning.
Meaning is Use: crucially, the meaning of a word isn't inherent in the word itself, but determined by how it's used within a particular language game. "Game" itself has different meanings depending on whether you're talking about a board game, a sporting event, or a child's imaginative play.

2. Exposing systematic logic (to a degree):

Family resemblances: Wittgenstein introduced the concept of "family resemblances" to describe how concepts are related. A family isn't defined by a single shared characteristic (like having blue eyes), but by a network of overlapping similarities. Similarly, concepts like "game," "art," or "belief" don't have a single, defining essence, but are linked through a web of related uses. This shows a certain system in how we think about these concepts.
Rule following: His famous thought experiments about rule following (e.g., the "rule book" for a game) reveal a systematic way we interpret rules – not as absolute dictates, but as guidance within a specific context. He showed how rules can be understood differently depending on how they're applied.
Form of life: He connected language to "forms of life," emphasising the social and cultural context in which language is used. This illustrates a structured way language is embedded in human existence.

3. Exposing implicit meaning (and the challenge):

The Puzzle of meaning: Wittgenstein recognised that understanding how language games work is often difficult. We often assume there's a straightforward connection between words and their objects, but this is frequently an illusion.

The "Private Language" Argument: His argument against a "private language" (a language that only one person can understand) highlighted the crucial role of social context in shaping our understanding. It implies that meaning isn't something we discover internally, but something we acquire through participation in a shared practice.
The Problem of Description: While he exposed implicit meanings, he didn't provide a systematic method for uncovering them. He didn't give us a formula for "reading" a language game. This is a significant point of criticism – he often left the reader to figure out the relevant game and its rules.

4. Is it "True"?

A Powerful insight, but not a complete system: Wittgenstein's work is undeniably a profound and influential critique of traditional philosophy. It offers a powerful insight into the relationship between language, thought, and social context. However, it's not a fully articulated system with concrete rules.
Interpretation is Key: The "truth" of Wittgenstein's ideas depends on your interpretation. Some philosophers see him as a radical pragmatist, while others view him as a skeptical critic of all attempts to find objective meaning.

In conclusion:

Wittgenstein did expose a systematic logic about language and meaning, particularly through the concept of language games and family resemblances. However, his approach was more about revealing a problem – the difficulty of finding objective, universal meaning – than about providing a complete solution. He focused on how meaning is created within specific contexts, leaving the task of understanding those contexts largely to the reader.

You've hit on the core tension between his rigorous, analytical approach and his insistence on a "phenomenal appreciation" of language – meaning, his aim wasn't to describe language, but to experience it. How to understand Wittgenstein's logic despite this apparent contradiction.
Here's a breakdown of how to approach it, broken down into key elements:

How define the Wittgenstein's logic

1. Wittgenstein's logic isn't about rules, it's about practices:

Forget formal systems: Wittgenstein rejects the idea of language as governed by fixed, logical rules like those pursued by Frege and Russell. He saw these as attempts to impose an artificial, abstract order on something fundamentally fluid and contextual.
Focus on 'Forms of Life': His concept of "forms of life" is crucial. Language doesn't operate in a vacuum; it's deeply embedded in a particular way of living, a social practice. It's how we live that shapes how we use language.
Example: Consider the word "pain." There's no single, logical definition that applies across all situations. The experience of pain is understood differently in a hospital, in a sporting event, or in a child's cry. Wittgenstein's logic isn't about defining pain; it's about understanding the practices that constitute our experience of it.

2. The "Phenomenal Appreciation" – It's Not About Subjective Feeling:

Not subjectivism: It's vital to understand that "phenomenal appreciation" doesn't mean language is simply a matter of subjective feeling. It's not saying, "Language is whatever feels true to you."
Experiencing the 'How' of Language: Instead, it's about directly experiencing the 'how' of language in action. It's about seeing how language works in a particular situation, without imposing external rules. It's about a kind of attentiveness to the flow of language.
Imagine Watching a Game: Imagine watching a game of cricket. You don't analyze the rules on paper to understand the game. You experience the game - the quick reactions, the strategic decisions, the shared excitement. Wittgenstein wants us to do something similar with language.

3. How to 'Read' Wittgenstein's Logic (Without Rules):

Attention to Context: Always focus on the specific situation in which a word or phrase is being used. What's the surrounding action? Who is speaking? What are the shared understandings?
Look for the 'Move': Wittgenstein is interested in the "move" – the actual, concrete way in which language is used in a particular situation. This is often a small, seemingly insignificant action.
Don't Look for Logical Closure: Don't expect language to lead you to a clear, logical conclusion. Sometimes, it simply does what it does—it expresses a feeling, a question, a command.
Example – The "Rule Book" Thought Experiment: In the rule book thought experiment, the question isn't whether the rules are correct, but how they are applied in a specific game. Wittgenstein wants us to see the rules not as a logical constraint, but as a guide for action.

4. A Useful Analogy:

Think of it like listening to music. You don't analyse the notes on a musical score to understand the music. You experience the music – its melody, its rhythm, its emotional impact. Wittgenstein's logic is like listening to music – it's about directly experiencing the 'flow' of language.
In short, Wittgenstein's logic isn't a system you can apply like a mathematical formula. It's a way of thinking about language that emphasises attentiveness, context, and the 'flow' of language in action.

The core of the criticism is that his approach, while insightful, ultimately lacks a solid foundation and can be seen as dangerously subjective.
The Core of the Criticism:

The primary objection is that Wittgenstein's 'logic' – particularly as presented in the Philosophical Investigations – feels remarkably unconstrained. It's presented as a method of understanding

language, but it lacks the criteria for determining whether a particular understanding is ‘correct’ or ‘incorrect.’ It’s a way of asking, "How does this use of language actually work?" but without offering a mechanism for evaluating the answer.

Specific points of criticism:

Lack of criteria for Justification: the most frequent criticism is that Wittgenstein doesn't provide any objective standards for assessing how we’ve ‘got it right’ when understanding a language game. He describes how language works, but doesn’t tell us how we should judge the quality of that understanding. It feels like accepting an observation without any grounding in truth or validity.
Risk of Relativism: Because there are no external criteria, the criticism argues that Wittgenstein’s approach inevitably leads to a kind of relativism. If understanding simply involves ‘seeing how it works’, then any perspective – even a profoundly flawed or misleading one – could be considered a ‘correct’ understanding.
Susceptibility to “Confabulations”: The process of simply describing a language game can, according to critics, lead to what they call "confabulations." This means that we can create a convincing-sounding explanation of a language game, even if that explanation is fundamentally wrong. Because there's no independent standard to check our interpretations, we can build elaborate structures around flawed understandings.

Difficulties with disagreement:

If understanding is simply a matter of ‘seeing how it works’, then how do we account for genuine disagreements? People can legitimately disagree about the ‘correct’ way to play a game, even if they’ve both observed it in action. Wittgenstein doesn’t offer a way to adjudicate these disagreements.

Wittgenstein's response (and why It doesn't fully address the criticism):

Wittgenstein argues that his aim isn't to provide a ‘logic’ in the traditional sense. He insists that his method is simply about illumination. He believes that by describing a language game, he can reveal the inherent difficulties and contradictions involved, thereby shedding light on our understanding. He uses the term “conjecture” (a term he borrowed from Hume) to describe what we're doing when we attempt to understand a language game. But even this doesn't fully resolve the problem because “conjecture” itself is an act of interpretation – and interpretations can be wrong.

Analogy:

Think of a detective examining a crime scene. The detective might observe the clues and attempt to reconstruct the events, but there’s no guarantee that their reconstruction is accurate.

Does this critique undermine Wittgenstein’s philosophy? Not entirely. It’s a powerful challenge that forces us to confront the limits of our understanding. However, it also highlights the difficulties of building a rigorous philosophical system based solely on descriptive analysis.

Le 13 septembre 2025

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